

It Ends in Court: Analyzing Entertainment Law Through Baldoni v. Lively

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I. Introduction: It Ends with a Lawsuit, but How Did It Begin?

Colleen Hoover never set out to write a viral sensation. In 2016, when *It Ends With Us* hit bookshelves, it was not heralded with flashy premieres or viral book trailers. Yet by 2019, the book had sold over a million copies, been translated into more than twenty languages, and circulated among book clubs, particularly among young women.¹ The novel quickly rose to fame, and then Hollywood came calling. Justin Baldoni, the actor best known for his role as Rafael Solano on the Emmy-nominated television series “Jane The Virgin,” resonated with Hoover’s novel. Baldoni had recently developed his own production company, Wayfarer Studios. The company’s mission is laid out on its website plainly, reading: “Wayfarer Studios strives to harness the power of storytelling to champion inspirational stories that act as true agents for social change.”² This time, Baldoni wanted his studio to bring *It Ends With Us* to life. However, what started as an adaptation of a popular novel became a legal firestorm. The events behind the scenes of *It Ends With Us* raised larger questions about power in Hollywood, the legal boundaries of storytelling, and just how much control a creator—or actor—has over the way a story is told.

II. A Timeline of the Disputes

Following the explosive success of *It Ends With Us*, Baldoni secured the rights to adapt the novel through Wayfarer Studios in January 2019.³ After years of development, in January

¹ Dave McNary, *Justin Baldoni Developing ‘It Ends With Us’ Romance Movie*, Variety (Jul. 2019), variety.com/2019/film/news/justin-baldoni-it-ends-with-us-movie-jane-the-virgin-1203268293.

² *About Wayfarer*, wayfarerstudios.com.

³ McNary, *supra* note 1.

2023, Baldoni announced that Blake Lively had been cast as the female lead (Lily Bloom) and that he would be playing the opposite male lead (Ryle Kincaid).⁴ Hoover publicly stated on Instagram that Lively was her “dream Lily” and that Baldoni embodied the essence of Ryle.⁵ Filming for *It Ends With Us* officially began in May 2023. The premiere was held on August 9, 2024, and the film was a box office success, grossing \$351 million worldwide.⁶ In press interviews, Baldoni publicly praised Lively, calling her “strong, funny, and intelligent” and credited her for shaping the film beyond just her performance.⁷ However, shortly after the film’s release, rumors of a feud between Lively and Baldoni began circulating online because the two appeared to avoid each other during the promotional tour. Speculations intensified on August 13, 2024, when TMZ reported allegations that Baldoni had engaged in inappropriate behavior on set, including extended kissing scenes, comments about Lively’s weight, and “fat-shaming.”⁸

As tensions mounted, on December 21, 2024, Lively filed a lawsuit accusing Baldoni of sexual harassment and workplace misconduct.⁹ The lawsuit detailed instances in which Baldoni allegedly engaged in inappropriate conversations about his past relationships, made unsolicited comments about Lively’s body, and added unapproved intimate scenes.¹⁰ The lawsuit also claimed that Baldoni exhibited retaliatory public relations behavior after Lively pushed back against these actions.¹¹ The next day, The New York Times published an exposé, reporting that Baldoni’s PR team had allegedly orchestrated a smear campaign against Lively.¹² The article

⁴ Maira Butt & Inga Parkel, *Blake Lively vs Justin Baldoni: A Timeline of the Feud and Lawsuit Between It Ends With Us Co-Stars*, Independent (Jan. 2025), independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/blake-lively-justin-baldoni-lawsuit-texts-voice-note-it-ends-with-us-b2688135.html.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Lively v. Wayfarer Studios LLC, No. 1:24-cv-10049 (S.D.N.Y. filed 2024).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 18–24.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Megan Twohey et al., ‘We Can Bury Anyone’: Inside a Hollywood Smear Machine, N.Y. Times (Dec. 2024), nytimes.com/2024/12/21/business/media/blake-lively-justin-baldoni-it-ends-with-us.html.

cited leaked private messages, one of which quoted Baldoni’s crisis manager, stating: “You know we can bury anyone.”¹³ The controversy escalated further on December 23, when William Morris Endeavor (WME), Baldoni’s longtime talent agency, severed ties with him.

In response, on December 31, 2024, Baldoni filed a \$400 million defamation lawsuit against Lively and her husband, actor Ryan Reynolds, alleging civil extortion, intentional interference with economic advantage, and false light invasion of privacy—or the public portrayal of an individual in an inaccurate or misleading light, causing significant emotional distress.¹⁴ The lawsuit claimed that Lively and Reynolds attempted to sabotage Baldoni’s career, using a calculated media strategy to paint him as an abuser.¹⁵ As the legal battle continued to play out, Baldoni released behind-the-scenes footage from the film on January 17 to counter Lively’s claims. The video included a moment where Baldoni kissed Lively’s neck, one of the key allegations in her harassment complaint. His legal team argued that the interaction was professional and in character.¹⁶ Then, on January 27, 2025, a voice memo surfaced of Baldoni privately apologizing to Lively for making her uncomfortable after rejecting her rewritten proposal for the film’s “iconic” rooftop scene, stating “I, for sure, fell short...I’m a very flawed man. But I will always apologize and then find my way back to center.”¹⁷ This leaked apology further complicated the public perception of the case, with both sides using it to support their narratives. The events have temporarily concluded, with a trial date scheduled for March 9, 2026 to expedite preliminary hearings due to concerns about pretrial publicity and attorney conduct.¹⁸

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Wayfarer Studios LLC v. Lively, No. 24STCV34662 (Cal. Super. Ct. filed 2024).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Butt & Parkel, *supra* note 4.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

III. Entertainment Law Principles at Play

While Hollywood is no stranger to high-profile legal disputes, this legal battle between Baldoni and Lively highlights significant gaps in industry regulations that, if properly addressed, might have prevented the lawsuit from escalating. At the core of Lively's allegations are claims of sexual harassment and workplace misconduct. In the entertainment industry, protections against harassment fall under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits workplace discrimination including sexual harassment.¹⁹ However, Hollywood operates in a unique legal gray area due to the power imbalances between actors, directors, and producers. Unlike traditional office environments, film sets involve physical intimacy, improvisation, and scenes requiring close personal contact, which makes it essential to establish clear, enforceable guidelines regarding intimacy.²⁰ The industry has taken steps to address this through the implementation of intimacy coordinators, professionals trained to choreograph intimate scenes while ensuring the comfort and consent of actors.²¹ However, the lack of a legally mandated requirement for intimacy coordinators in all productions can allow directors to proceed without structured oversight.

Another critical issue in this case is defamation, which Baldoni and Lively both claim was weaponized against them through an alleged smear campaign. Defamation in entertainment law is complex, as public figures face a higher standard when proving reputational harm. In *New York Times v. Sullivan*, the Supreme Court established that public figures must demonstrate "actual malice" to succeed in a defamation lawsuit, meaning that false statements must have been made with knowledge of their falsehood or reckless disregard for the truth.²² For Baldoni

¹⁹ Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e.

²⁰ Kayla Webley Adler, *What #MeToo Changed in Hollywood—and What It Didn't*, Elle (Oct. 2022), elle.com/culture/a41539940/hollywood-five-years-after-harvey-weinstein-metoo.

²¹ Laura B. Wickins, *The Role of the Intimacy Coordinator*, N.Y. Film Acad. (Jan. 2023), nyfa.edu/student-resources/role-of-intimacy-coordinator.

²² *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).

and Lively, the challenge lies in proving that they and their PR teams deliberately spread misinformation with the intent to ruin one another's careers. The presence of leaked text messages and private conversations suggests that reputational attacks played a role in shaping the public narrative of their feud. However, stronger federal protections against coordinated media defamation—such as clearer standards for determining when PR-driven narratives cross into legally actionable territory—might have provided a more effective deterrent against the use of media campaigns as leverage in legal disputes.

Contract law also plays a crucial role in this lawsuit, particularly concerning the boundaries of creative control. Lively's claims regarding unauthorized intimate scenes and Baldoni's alleged improvisations raise questions about whether her contract explicitly defined the scope of her participation as an actress. Lively's lawsuit alleges that she had a contract rider that specifically addressed intimate scenes, required an intimacy coordinator to be present at all times, prohibited spontaneous improvisation of intimate or sexual scenes, and mandated that all such scenes be choreographed in advance and approved in writing.²³ However, stronger enforcement mechanisms or more explicit industry-wide standards could have preemptively addressed disputes over creative liberties taken during filming. If such clauses were standardized in entertainment contracts, performers would have clearer recourse when unexpected changes arise on set. Additionally, expanding performer rights legislation to include mandatory arbitration for contractual disputes might have resolved these conflicts privately.

IV. Conclusion

Ultimately, the legal disputes following *It Ends With Us* demonstrate that larger concerns about celebrity power in Hollywood, the legal boundaries of storytelling, and how much control a creator or actor has can be addressed through stronger legal precautions—namely, legally

²³ *Lively*, No. 1:24-cv-10049 at 27–32.

binding clauses and protective legislation for performances. As Hollywood continues to navigate the complexities of power dynamics and creative freedom, legal reforms are necessary to ensure that high-profile disputes like this one do not become the industry standard—because without them, it all too often ends in court.